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SAM RAYBURN: THE TEXAS POLITICIAN AS NEW DEALER

ALEXANDER GRAHAM SHANKS

When I consider Sam Rayburn's long tenure in the House and think how valuable his long, unbroken experience is to the country, it makes me realize how, in one respect, British Parliamentary customs have been superior to ours. I have always felt that the British had the best of it in keeping their good men in Parliament for long periods—Gladstone, Lloyd George, and Churchill, to mention a few—instead of replacing them every few years as we do in many cases.¹—Alben Barkley.

Sam Rayburn's role in the enactment of significant New Deal legislation shoved him into the national limelight and gave a primary impetus to his election as Democratic floor leader, in January, 1937, and as Speaker of the House of Representatives in September, 1940.

His record as a New Deal lawmaker and legislator was unexcelled.² President Roosevelt considered Rayburn "the most valuable man in Congress while . . . the programs of the New Deal were fighting for survival."³ Jerry Voorhis, the liberal California representative, declared: No "man in Congress . . . can point to a more imposing list of . . . progressive laws . . . which resulted from bills bearing his name."⁴ Ralph McGill wrote that in the years of the New Deal, it was Rayburn, "the small town rural conservative, who labored most successfully in the vineyard of social reform."⁵

Marquis Childs, the able columnist of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, asserted that Rayburn and Roosevelt were partners in the New Deal, and that Rayburn was "an indispensable component of the partnership that shaped the Democratic Party." Roosevelt represented the city masses, while Rayburn spoke for the dispossessed South and West. This alliance, according to Childs, accounted for the impressive Democratic victories in one election after another. The Democrats, the minority party from the Civil War to the New Deal, became the dominant, majority party.⁶

Sam Rayburn was a Texas politician, a party man, a manipulator of the legislative process. He was neither erudite nor able to direct the political thinking of the United States. He was not a theorist, but he had an excellent memory and a quick, well-organized mind that could penetrate to the core of the matter.⁷ He could not draft the technical provisions of the securities legislation, but he understood the fundamental issues, and could grasp the financial intricacies when they were explained to him.⁸ Despite his limited schooling and experience with corporate organization, Rayburn fought able specialists in law and finance, and emerged with legislation considered sound by both the financial community and New Deal liberals.⁹

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Politics, the House of Representatives, and the Democratic Party were the main components of Rayburn's life.

Although Rayburn was a loyal party man, he was not a rubber stamp and at times opposed the Roosevelt administration. Charles Wolverton, Republican congressman of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, said that Rayburn would not accept "must" legislation from the White House.¹⁰ Rayburn denounced Eastern financial combinations like the holding companies, but he played an active role in blocking Roosevelt's oil legislation.¹¹ Rayburn, a practical Texas politician, enjoyed his congressional seat from the Fourth District of Texas and lived cozily with the oil interests of Texas.

In the 1932 Democratic National Convention, Rayburn released the Garner delegates, maneuvered Texas and California into the Roosevelt camp, and ensured Roosevelt the Democratic presidential nomination. Garner accepted the party's vice-presidential nomination—a decision he later regretted. There was no deal between the Hyde Park aristocrat and the Bonham farmer, but unquestionably the convention maneuvering placed Roosevelt under special obligation to Rayburn.¹²

In the Seventy-Third Congress Rayburn played a major role in the enactment of the permanent Securities Act of 1933 and the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.¹³ This securities legislation, an important part of Roosevelt's comprehensive program for regulation of the nation's banking and financial organizations, provided for effective regulation of stock issues and stock exchange transactions. In 1933 and 1934, Richard Whitney and Wall Street opposed the New Deal securities legislation, but the New Dealers split the financial community and received support from Robert Lovett, James Forrestal, E. A. Pierce, and other advocates of moderate stock regulation.¹⁴

As Chairman of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, Rayburn was a key figure in the passage of New Deal transportation and communication legislation. The Emergency Railroad Transportation Act, providing for the establishment of a Federal Coordinator, a more flexible rule of rate making, and the repeal of the recapture clause of the Transportation Act of 1920, was the most important piece of transportation legislation in the first Roosevelt administration.¹⁵ The Federal Communications Act of 1934, an uncontroversial measure, based largely upon existing statutes, codified federal legislation regulating communications and held most controversial questions in abeyance until the new Federal Communications Commission recommended proposals for their solution.¹⁶

The controversial Rayburn-Wheeler Holding Company Act of 1935 was the most significant New Deal legislation that Rayburn engineered through the House. The private power companies waged a bitter campaign against the bill. The House rejected the administration backed "death sentence," but Rayburn and the administration persuaded Congress to pass the Barkley Compromise, outlawing holding companies of more than two stages. The Holding Company Act resulted in a significant readjustment of complicated holding company superstructures in the utilities field. It was

the holding company fight which placed Rayburn in the good graces of the administration.¹⁷

Rayburn considered the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 as one of his greatest accomplishments. This act had a more direct impact on American lives than any other New Deal legislation. The New Deal program stimulated the use of electricity by lowering the price, expanded the electrical market, and enriched the quality of rural living. Nowhere was the New Deal impact more significant.¹⁸

Sam Rayburn's democratic, agrarian philosophy emanated from his rural northeast Texas environment. He had faith in the will of the people expressed at the ballot box, and believed that the American people could chart the nation's course.¹⁹ He considered farmers the chosen people of God. He asserted: "It must be the first consideration of the American statesman . . . to see that something is done for agriculture, the most basic and vital of our industries."²⁰

Rayburn supported the New Deal farm programs designed to aid the depression-stricken farmer. On September 14, 1933, he wired Roosevelt that the southern people wanted an extension of the currency to bolster the declining price of cotton, a decline which threatened the whole South.²¹ In the 1930's Rayburn voted for the Bankhead Cotton Control Act, the Electric Home and Farm Authority, the Farm Credit Association, and proclaimed the Agricultural Adjustment Act the best farm legislation ever passed.²²

Conditioned by a rural, conservative background, Rayburn was a strong proponent of capitalism. He maintained that so "far, the hope of profit has led to the economic organization in our country, the most productive and the most democratic in the distribution of its proceeds yet known to man."²³ He knew the value of hard work in overcoming poverty, and had no patience with legislation designed to coddle the people.²⁴ Furthermore, Rayburn urged that "government agencies should be removed from competition with private business. I believe it is the business of the government to govern and not to go into business."²⁵ He never accepted the welfare programs of Harry Hopkins and the liberal New Dealers.

"Northern liberals often called Mr. Rayburn a southern conservative. . . . Vigorous conservatives called him a liberal."²⁶ Rayburn was angrily denounced for being too lenient with the financial interests, while the conservative press and stock exchange and holding company officials claimed that the Rayburn-Wheeler Holding Company Act would ruin their business.

Rayburn avoided both the liberal and conservative labels, and considered himself a middle-of-the-road Democrat. He did not believe that true conservatism meant always supporting the status quo. New laws were needed to meet changing conditions. The New Deal securities and holding company legislation purged racketeers and strengthened capitalism. Later, the stock exchange and holding company officials admitted that Congress saved the country's exchanges and removed the giant holding companies, which siphoned off the profits of the operating companies.²⁷

Rayburn began his long tenure in the House of Representatives as a state rights advocate, but he gradually came to the conclusion that the states were not accepting their responsibilities and advocated a stronger role for the Federal government.²⁵ He supported the enormous grants of power given to the President. He explained that Congress gave many powers to the President

that we would not in normal times think of voting away but we have been suffering so long on account of having Presidents who had no program for relief in these terrible times, that it has been my belief that some action should be taken for relief. We have a President who has a program and we are willing to trust him at least for awhile. Practically all the emergency legislation that we are passing has a life from one to two years and if it is bad it will expire within two years and if it is good it will always bring relief within that time.²⁶

The middle-of-the-road Rayburn criticized the Ultra Left and the Ultra Right. He defended capitalism and rejected the demand to abolish the exchanges. Just "as you do not break a horse's leg to keep it from straying . . . for the night, so big business ought to be regulated but not destroyed. . . ."²⁷ On the other hand, Rayburn lambasted the Ultra Right for weakening the faith of the American people in their President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Some wealthy ultra conservatives "want everything static and always preach that any movement that goes forward is socialistic and destructive." The ultra conservatives, with hired regiments of writers and public speakers to spread propaganda, scoffed at intellectuals who refused "to plead partisan causes and have insisted upon seeking the truth. . . ."²⁸ He maintained that business opposed government intervention "but when bad times come I have never seen them shrink from coming down to Washington and asking the Government to take a hand."²⁹

Rayburn's political views, in many respects, resembled those of a Jeffersonian Democrat. Rayburn supported government economy and public education but was not sympathetic to labor, at least in the earlier part of his long political career. He wrote to one constituent that the United States "is a tax-ridden country and taxes, national, state, county and town must come down before our people can make a living and bear these burdens. . . ."³⁰

Labor frequently opposed Rayburn during the Wilson, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover administrations. Rayburn at this time was a staunch agrarian state righter. Under Wilson, Rayburn opposed legislation to prohibit shipment of goods in interstate commerce produced by child labor. He opposed the Plumb Plan for government ownership of the railroads. Labor was lukewarm toward Rayburn and in 1922 Edward Westbrook, backed by the railroad unions, almost defeated him.

In the 1930's Rayburn and labor moved toward a rapprochement. In the first Roosevelt administration Rayburn voted for the Emergency Unemployment Act, the Wagner Act, and on January 13, 1936, he voted to abolish child labor in the District of Columbia.³¹ Rayburn opposed the

sweat shop, the thirty-hour bill and the sit-down strikes conducted by the Congress of Industrial Organizations.⁵⁵

True to the Jeffersonian heritage, Rayburn supported public education. The former school teacher asserted:

We cannot pay too great a tribute to our schools. Under a form of government which recognizes the worth and integrity of the individual, regardless of who he may be or where he may live, it is essential that there be comprehensive education that will give to every person that kind of training which will make him understand and appreciate what democracy means and make him desirous of accepting his responsibility as a citizen.⁵⁶

Ralph McGill wrote that Sam Rayburn was not an average man. He was not a man for small talk and concern for social amenities.⁵⁷ A man of gruff mannerisms, he was frequently abrupt to a cabinet officer or an industrialist. Some newsmen always referred to him as a crusty old war-horse. But in his personal relationships the lonely Rayburn was often sentimental, and frequently sought companionship.⁵⁸ Rayburn's dignity stayed any excessive familiarity, but he was kind especially to his employees and to school children.⁵⁹ When questioned about his extreme politeness to waitresses and bellhops, Rayburn replied:

I wouldn't be unkind to a little boy or a girl waiting on me for all the gold in Fort Knox. . . . That little girl might be your sister or mine. What we do in this life is often determined by a . . . small margin. I missed being a tenant farmer by just that much—he snapped his fingers—but someone was kind to me in my youth.⁶⁰

The taciturn Rayburn spoke only on rare occasions, and then in a low, conversational tone.⁶¹ He talked briefly, pointedly and with no flourishes in the stripped-down vocabulary of a Texas cowhand.⁶² Rayburn disliked publicity, demagogues and demagogery. Raymond Moley maintained that no congressman "has ever so austere renounced even the suspicion of demagogery, of baiting opponents or of underlining class distinction."⁶³ Rayburn was not a back-slapper; he was the last of a frontier type.

Although an avowed internationalist, Rayburn never crossed any ocean. When Congress adjourned, he would buy a stack of western dime novels, stretch "himself out in a Pullman and happily set out for his farm on the main road into Bonham. . . ."⁶⁴ Next to the House of Representatives and politics, the family farm, on which he raised Hereford cattle, was his love. The Bonham farmer considered "simple, honest folk who don't want to make a lot of money, but just want a decent country in which to raise their families," as the backbone of the nation.⁶⁵ He did not consider a man a saint because he wore overalls and chewed Brown Mule tobacco, or another a devil because he wore Brooks Brothers clothes.

Having experienced poverty and having been an underdog himself, he sympathized with the unfortunate especially in times of stress. The common people recognized and appreciated his attitude.⁶⁶ Rayburn favored public assistance until those in plight could be rehabilitated. He asserted:

There will always be a minority of defectives, diseased and casuals, who will be more or less dependent upon others. But, this minority can, through intelligent social activity, be reduced. We dare not assume that only the people who have achieved the requirements for a good standard of living are the only ones capable of such achievement.⁴⁷

As Chairman of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, the deliberate Rayburn efficiently conducted committee hearings and debates. His committee held thorough hearings and kept abreast of its work.⁴⁸ Charles Wolverton, Republican member of the committee, said that Rayburn would not accept "must" legislation from the White House. The committee had the reputation of reporting well prepared and thoroughly studied legislation.⁴⁹ Respecting Wall Street and financial interests, Rayburn did not want congressional legislation to be punitive or to injure legitimate business interests.⁵⁰

Rayburn was not brilliant wealthy, genteel, well-educated or from a well-known political family, but he had ability and pertinacity, and was ambitious. He chose politics as his profession at an early age, and devoted himself to his career. The seniority system and repeated election victories in the Democratic Fourth District enabled him to become Chairman of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. The *Washington Sunday Star* maintained that his success as a legislator and a lawmaker was a result of his policy "of absolute honesty and consistent loyalty to the Democratic Party. These two attributes . . . made him the most valuable man in Congress for the implementation of the bold new programs of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal."⁵¹

But Rayburn was more than a legislative manipulator and a party war-horse. Republican congressmen, generally on good terms with Rayburn, testified to his fairness and integrity. Representative Joseph Martin, later Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, and a close friend of Rayburn, asserted that Rayburn did not deter from his objective, but refused to run over his opponents.⁵²

The House was a school, in which the legislator needed many terms to acquire the necessary skills to perform his job. Rayburn's experience as Speaker of the Texas state legislature and in the United States House of Representatives gave him "a thorough grasp of the techniques of legislation—the application of the complex rules, the endless horse trading between groups and sections, the highly specialized tactics of committee, conference and debate. . . ."⁵³ Rayburn had an uncanny ability to judge the temper of the House. Seldom deceived by glib talk, false exterior, or specious reasoning, Rayburn was a good judge of people and their interiors.

Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner maintained that Rayburn caught the tone and learned the tricks of leadership. Leadership . . . is often accorded to a type of man so special that it is possible to make a composite portrait of the natural leader. He is

a good fellow, sociable and fond of masculine society. He is astute in handling other men, clever in perceiving motives and a good observer of the habits and appetencies of his colleagues. He is especially somewhat conservative. but rarely grows emotional over political issues and never "demagogues when the doors are closed."⁴

NOTES

¹Alben William Barkley, *That Reminds Me* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 99-100.

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³Washington *Sunday Star*, January 5, 1941, in Ray Stanley Lancer, "Sam Rayburn, Legislator" (unpublished Master's Thesis, East Texas State College, 1962), p. 34. (Hereinafter cited as Laney, "Sam Rayburn.")

⁴Jerry Voorhis, "A Communication: Rayburn of Texas," *New Republic*, CXI (July 10, 1944), 44. (Hereinafter cited as Voorhis, "Rayburn.")

⁵Ralph McGill, in *Houston Post*, November 17, 1961, in Rayburn MSS.

⁶Marquis Childs, Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, October 18, 1961, in Rayburn MSS.

⁷Paul F. Healy, "They're Just Crazy About Sam," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXIV (November 24, 1961), 70: Author's Interview with Dwight B. Hardeman, Former Administrative Assistant of Samuel Rayburn, Washington, D. C., August 11, 1963. (Hereinafter cited as Author's Interview with Hardeman, August 11, 1963.)

⁸Author's Interview with Benjamin Victor Cohen, Washington, D. C., August 15, 1963. (Hereinafter cited as Author's Interview with Cohen, August 15, 1963.)

⁹Donald Hinga, "Sam Rayburn: Texas Squire," *Southwest Review*, XXIX (Summer, 1944), 472. (Hereinafter cited as Hinga, "Sam Rayburn.")

¹⁰Author's Interview with Charles Anderson Wolverton, Camden, New Jersey, August 27, 1963. (Hereinafter cited as Author's Interview with Wolverton, August 27, 1963.)

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¹³James Walcott Wadsworth, Jr., in Columbia Oral History Collection, Wadsworth, III, 391.

¹⁴Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval*, Vol. 111: *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1960), pp. 465-466. (Hereinafter cited as Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*.)

¹⁵Samuel I. Rosenman (ed.), *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 13 volumes.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, III, 107-108.

¹⁷Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, "Never Leave Them Angry," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXIII (January 18, 1941), 78. (Hereinafter cited as Alsop and Kintner, "Never Leave Them Angry.")

¹⁸Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, p. 379; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 157.

¹⁹Voorhis, "Rayburn," p. 46.

²⁰Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn to John Donaghey, January 10, 1933, in Rayburn MSS.

²¹Samuel Rayburn to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, September 14, 1933, PPR 474, Roosevelt MSS.

²²Dallas *Morning News*, January 12, 1933; Samuel Rayburn to Claude Molen, February 4, 1933, Rayburn MSS.; Lionel V. Patenaude, *The New Deal and Texas* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 1953), pp. 234, 266.

²³Samuel Rayburn Speech, September 12, 1934, in Bascom Nolly Timmons Scrapbook No. 1, in Rayburn MSS. (Hereinafter cited as Rayburn Speech, September 12, 1934.)

²⁴Ralph McGill in *Houston Chronicle*, November 17, 1961; the *Los Angeles Examiner*, November 17, 1961; and the *Austin Statesman*, November 17, 1961, in Rayburn Scrapbooks, Rayburn MSS.

²⁵Samuel Rayburn to A. P. Hughston, March 11, 1933, Rayburn MSS.

²⁶*Christian Science Monitor*, November 17, 1961.

²⁷Samuel Rayburn, "Speech to Dallas Milk Dealers Association," June, 1937, p. 1, in Rayburn Speech File, Rayburn MSS. (Hereinafter cited as Rayburn, "Speech to Milk Dealers Association.")

²⁸Author's Interview with Hardeman, August 11, 1963.

²⁹Samuel Rayburn to S. D. McGee, May 22, 1933, Rayburn MSS.

³⁰David L. Cohn, "Mr. Speaker," *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXX (October, 1942), 75.

³¹Rayburn Speech, September 12, 1934.

³²Rayburn, "Speech to Milk Dealers Association," p. 2.

³³Samuel Rayburn to A. P. Hughston, March 11, 1933, Rayburn MSS.

³⁴Congressional Record, 72nd Cong., 1 Sess. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), LXXVII, 2130; Congressional Record, 74th Cong., 2 Sess., LXXX, 356.

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⁴²Raymond Moley, *27 Masters of Politics, in a Personal Perspective* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1949), p. 248.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴⁴Healy, "They're Just Crazy About Sam," p. 70.

⁴⁵Hinga, "Sam Rayburn," p. 472.

⁴⁶Rayburn Speech, September 12, 1934.

⁴⁷Samuel Rayburn Speech, "Semi-Centennial Exposition, April 1, 1937, Rayburn Speech File, Rayburn MSS.

⁴⁸Samuel Rayburn, "Memorandum on Seventy-Third Congress," June 15, 1934, in Rayburn MSS.

⁴⁹Author's Interview with Wolverton, August 27, 1963.

⁵⁰Samuel Rayburn to Franklin Roosevelt, November 7, 1933, PPf 474, Roosevelt MSS.

⁵¹Washington *Sunday Star*, January 5, 1941, Laney, "Sam Rayburn," p. 37.

⁵²Author's Interview with Hardeman, August 11, 1963.

⁵³Alsop and Kintner, "Never Leave Them Angry," p. 23.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.